

A Journal From Africa

Stories from my year in college at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Ghana, West Africa in 1982, and my journey home there after 24 years.

ABOUT ME



Dennis Hunter

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THURSDAY, JUNE 28, 2012

Should We Run?! Should We Run?!



I was thinking about the stories of incredible contrast during my past in Kumasi and Accra.

The reasons for the military coup were many. And since I was not born and raised in Ghana, it wouldn't be appropriate for me to provide opinions on the merits of the military taking over. Historically over many years, there has been a pattern of military coups as a reaction to a corrupt civilian government. Layered on top of that are issues of expected compliance with the IMF and World Bank, loaning money to a developing country at low interest rates, but the

IMF was also demanding economic reforms resulting in the public's perception of high interest rates with rampant inflation. Developed countries wanting to politically dictate the development of Ghana, labeling its leaders as "socialists" or "tools of the USSR" if they did not fall in line or if they questioned them. British colonists who packed up and left, leaving the infant infrastructure to fend for itself. Years of corruption, or as we say in Twi *kalabule*, had created an environment ripe for volatile change. High inflation rates, food costs soaring, transportation costs soaring - all leading up to masses of people struggling to make ends meet and to feed their families. Ultimately, it's not easy to find exactly who is to blame. The continent of Africa is a very complicated place, and each country has its own stories of hardship and pain at the expense of people.

As a friend said to me, unfortunately the legacy of unjust economic and fiscal reform is still wreaking havoc across the developing world. With the recent economic collapse in developed countries, we are starting to understand the pain that the continent of Africa has been enduring for generations. I hope we can witness the moment when the world realizes the power of the teachings of the Baha'i Faith with regards to an economic system based on justice and compassion. Where we realize that there must be a spiritual solution to the economic problems in the world. Can you imagine the difference?

Here's an example of the excesses. At the Baha'i Center in Accra, I could see across Ring Road that there was a one story building and to the right of it was

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an 8 story building. In between there was a sign that said Ajeshie Hotel. I assumed it was the 8 story building but I never saw anyone stay at that hotel though, so one day I asked why. The clerk who worked at the Center pointed out that the one story building was the hotel, and the 8 story building was a man's house who had a reputation for skimming money from construction contracts entered into with the government.

The military coup was a reaction against that corruption and an effort to shut down the black market which was the real economy in the country. The official exchange rate, for example, would mean that a loaf of bread would have cost me about \$50.00 US, but by exchanging money on the black market, that same loaf of bread was 50 cents. It was the only way to survive and people who did not have access to hard currency from a foreign source were hit hard. I had to keep my money in an account in Togo, the next country east, and each month I had to go over the border to pull out hard currency called CFA - Colonies Françaises d'Afrique - used by the Francophone countries and backed by the French Treasury. I would have to hide them in the bottom of my shoes or sew them into the handle of my suitcase, and then pray as I crossed back over the border while being searched by Ghanaian soldiers. I then had to meet in a dark house in Accra with a money changer to get local currency called the *cedi*, hoping to God we would not be discovered because the military said they would shoot anyone on site for participating in the black market. Many years later, as Ghana's economy boomed, the lift was taken off the government-imposed exchange rates, so monetary exchange is now conducted legally out in the open.

At one point, there was an attempt to devalue the cedi, so everyone was required to bring their cash to a bank and exchange it for new bills. The old bills were useless. There was a story at KNUST that a woman living in Bomso, the neighborhood just outside the university gate, had done incredibly good business as a waxprint cloth seller - so good that she burned her house down because she had a room filled to the ceiling with cedis and she was more concerned about the military catching her than to take the risk and exchange the money.

And with the military shutting down the black market, the shop owners and market mommies refused to bring their goods to the market to sell at official prices set up by the military government. Each day came with an increased effort required to find even staple foods at the market.



Some staples became luxuries, like bread. Bread is not an item from the traditional Akan menu. It was brought in by the Dutch and the British. It was fascinating to see how the process of

baking bread as a business venture was adopted in Ghana, though. Typically a baker has a home business, building a huge clay oven at their house the size of a good sized room. The baker gets up before the sun comes up and starts baking to be ready to sell bread to either neighbors or to sellers that take the

loaves to market.

As time went on in 1982, bread was so scarce it was practically non-existent. Auntie Bea had heard rumor that the woman who bakes in the village of Adwaso near the Ridge Road gate to the university had found a supply of flour and had started baking again. She asked me to go and see if I could beg her for a few loaves to sell to us. Since I was an *obruni* or white man, the baker would be more amiable to sell to me since she would know I was not part of the military government. I got up at dawn and walked to the woman's house with a piece of waxprint cloth about the size of a bed sheet that I would wrap the bread. She was very kind, and let me know I could purchase as much as I liked. The smell of the baking bread coming from her clay oven was heavenly. Knowing that we would probably not see bread for a long time, I asked if I could buy everything she had - 20 loaves. She agreed.

I stacked the loaves up on my cloth, tied it like a knapsack, and slung the huge parcel over my shoulder. Walking back to the house and carrying such a huge stash of bread was terrifying. I didn't know if suddenly a military truck would drive through, or if one of our neighbors would become suspicious and create a scene. Somehow, I made it though.

Auntie Bea's reaction was priceless. She was joyfully happy, but at the same time she was so angry - just like anyone's loving mother - as she scolded and reprimanded me for having taken such a risk that could have jeopardized the whole family. I sat at the table in the dining room, taking my verbal punishment while I watched Auntie Bea cut the loaves and store them in the freezer. By the time she was done, she put her hands on both my cheeks and gave me a kiss on the forehead. "Well done, Yaw! Well done!" To this day every time I visit the Asares, Aunie Bea tells the story and laughs.

Finding provisions continued to get more and more difficult, so one day Mawushi and I decided to take the bus to Accra and see what we could find for our families. We braved the checkpoints with the soldiers, and when we got to Accra we hit the streets to start combing the shops. Imagine how surreal it was to walk into a westernized grocery store to find almost nothing on the shelves. Even the tone of the shoppers was surreal. Everyone was quiet as we realized the gravity of the situation.

We continued to systematically hit the shops. We found a French government issued 4 litre container of corn oil for cooking. We found a sack of rice. We found a 2 pound tin of processed American cheddar cheese, with a stamp on the tin, "Compliments of the United States of America."

We then heard rumor that a shop a few blocks away had powdered milk that they were selling in rations. As we came around the corner we realized that there was a queue of probably a hundred people down the street, all waiting their turn. We shrugged at each other and got in line, knowing that this was going to take some time but we were in no rush to get anywhere.

I will never forget the feeling of the hair on the back of my neck raising as I heard the sound of trucks revving their engines, shifting gears to speed up, and the sound of "pop! pop! pop!" Mawushi and I turned around. My heart stopped and everything turned into slow motion. There were 4 huge flatbed trucks barreling down the street with what must have been 100 soldiers, all armed with machine guns, shooting over our heads to get the crowd to disperse. Suddenly, women were screaming and babies were crying. I turned to Mawushi and yelled as loud as I could so that he could hear me above the din, "SHOULD WE RUN?! SHOULD WE RUN?!" He looked around and then pointed and yelled back at

me, "YES! LET'S GO!"

I have never run so fast in my life. We were scrambling and dodging through the crowd of people, trying to get across the street. I then realized he had pointed to the entry way of an office building, set back from the sidewalk. We ran in and pushed our backs into the door of the building, trying our best to disappear. Mawushi motioned to me to keep quiet. We stood still, not moving so as to not draw the attention of the soldiers now passing us in the trucks. People were running everywhere. The sound of the machine guns firing was deafening.

After a few minutes, it was quiet. The trucks and soldiers were gone and the gunfire had ceased. We slowly came out of the doorway. There was no one around. Luckily there were no signs of anyone getting hurt, but it was terrifying to see the street completely deserted. It was as if no one had been there at all.



Maybe a month later Nana, Akwasi and I were out on the grounds of KNUST. We had gone to the post office on the campus so that I could check for mail from the U.S. It was a day off from school, so we were not in a rush. We decided to go for a long walk.

The grounds were beautiful. There were expansive manicured lawns, carefully groomed by the laga laga man who used a cutlass (like a sword) to keep the grass tidy. Beautiful Acacia trees that bloomed with thousands of yellow or red flowers, and Bodi trees with white branches filled with dark green leaves that stretched far over the lawns. Tropical flowers like orchids and anthuriums grew in carefully planted flower beds. And it was so quiet. Just the sounds of song birds singing, or the chatter of monkeys in the trees.

As we walked, we saw that the clouds were coming in from the horizon with a promise of tropical rain with lightening and thunder. Growing up in Southern California, I missed out on the spectacle of thunder storms. The homes at KNUST were built with concrete block, and yet the thunder from the lightening was so powerful that it could make the entire house shake. You could tell when the rain was coming, because the wind would pick up and there was a scent of fresh water in the air.

We kept walking, keeping an eye on the clouds. But this was strange - there was no wind coming with it. No rumbling of thunder in the distance. It was also

strange that this was just one cloud and it was too low. There was something very odd about this, but we couldn't figure out what exactly was different.

The cloud steadily approached us, and the first thing we noticed was that the color was wrong. Thunder clouds are white on top and dark grey - almost black - on the bottom, with flashes of lightening inside lighting them up. This cloud had none of that. It was a light grey and even-toned throughout.

And the cloud was silent - no thunder.

Curiosity was soon overcome by concern. We each stood still on the pathway at the edge of one of the huge lawns, and silently watched what was coming towards us. It got bigger and bigger, moving very quickly and changing color. It was no longer grey, it was more of a light blue.

I whispered, barely loud enough to be heard, "Should we run, you guys?" "Should we run?" Nana replied back in a whisper as well, "No, not yet. Let's see what happens." We all stood frozen. The cloud was now bright blue, and was shifting and churning like flowing water. Soon it was upon us. And then we were completely engulfed in it.

It must have been a million sparkling blue butterflies. Many landed on us, while the cloud circled around us - as if to greet us and tell us that there was nothing to be afraid of. We started to quietly laugh in disbelief. Each of us stood, with our arms outstretched, covered head to toe with blue butterflies, each resting their wings. And it was silent. You could have heard a pin drop. Nana whispered, "Aren't you glad we didn't run, Yaw?" I whispered back, "Indeed."

And then once they finished their rest, they took off just as quietly as they had arrived, and the cloud continued to fly in the same direction it was headed in complete silence. We didn't move. We just stood quietly and watched the cloud disappear in the distance, wondering where they were going to. I imagined that this must be what it is like to touch the spirit of God.

People hear my stories of the hardships we endured that year, but looking back we endured the pain because there were moments of great beauty like this, confirming my faith in such a profound manner.

Posted by Dennis Hunter at 3:27 PM No comments:

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WEDNESDAY, JUNE 27, 2012

Finding My Way Home to Oguaa

Things started to come together very quickly after I made up my mind to go back to Ghana to assist the Baha'i community. Akwasi advised me to write a letter to the National Spiritual Assembly and also get in touch with an old friend, Mawushi Nutakor who was now serving as one of the Auxiliary Board Members to the Continental Counselors. These institutions work to support and assist the local Baha'i communities to develop and grow.

Mawushi and I were also close friends when I was at KNUST in 1982. He's another friend with an amazing story about how he became a Baha'i. A couple years younger than I am, he was a student at Mfantshipim Secondary School in



Cape Coast. A fervent believer in fundamentalist Christianity like Akwasi, he planned on proving that the Baha'i Faith was false and contrary to Christian doctrine. His father was a lecturer at KNUST, so

when he was home on breaks from school, he also attended the firesides at the Shapiros. And let's just say he was far more head strong than Akwasi.

Auntie Bea introduced us. I was taken aback because Mawushi immediately started asking questions, quoting scriptures and passages from the Bible. Auntie Bea practically threw her hands up in the air and told me that since I was raised Christian, I was now responsible for carrying on these discussions with him. One night we got onto the subject of the Holy Trinity, and this was one of my favorite subjects. Baha'is believe that the concept of the Holy Trinity is like the reflection of the sun in a mirror. The Father is the sun itself providing light and heat for life, the Son which is the Manifestation that I had previously referred to, is symbolized by the mirror having the ability to reflect the knowledge of the Father in the same way the mirror reflects the image the sun, and the Holy Ghost is like the rays of sun reflected from the mirror - redirecting the heat and light from the rays. At about 3:00AM in the morning, he finally got very quiet. I think I had finally exhausted him.

As Mawushi tells the story, he went back to Mfantshipim and would not stop talking about the Baha'i Faith. His schoolmates were so astounded that one actually said to him, "You talk so much about this Baha'i Faith that you should become one of them."

When he came home for his next break, Mawushi came by the house to visit. He was very quiet. His animated quoting of Christian scripture and proposing arguments against the Baha'i Faith were no more. He told us that he wanted to be a Baha'i. And with that, Ghana was blessed with one of the hardest working, most well read and charismatic Baha'is I know. His dedication is tireless. He travels in his 4 wheel drive truck all over the Accra and Central Regions, meeting with the Baha'is and encouraging their efforts to spread this amazing message.

Back in the 80's, soon after I came back to the U.S., Mawushi left for France for many years to continue his education, returning to Ghana with his beautiful wife Cecile and their wonderful children.

So, about my trip home. I decided to leave it in the hands of the National Spiritual Assembly and Mawushi to decide where I could be the greatest assistance during my month long trip. I secretly hoped that I would be able to go to Kumasi and revisit all the villages that I had grown to love there, but they decided that it was best that I go to Brafoyaw to stay with Uncle Prince and Auntie Aggie Abaidoo, and their family. I didn't even know where Brafoyaw was. I looked it up using Google maps and found it was just east of Cape Coast near Moree



Junction, the town of Moree which is a 400 year old fishing town, and the town of Yamoransa - all within a 5 minute ride by taxi.

The Fante people have spent centuries in the area, and the actual name for the

city is Oguaa in Fante. Cape Coast is actually a name given by the Portuguese and later translated to English by the British who took over the Cape Coast Castle. It was originally built by the Portuguese in the late 15th century and later taken over by the Dutch in 1610, the Swedes in 1652 and then the British captured the Castle in 1664. The British staged much of their slave trade from the Castle, as well as El Mina Castle further west of Cape Coast along the beach. I'll tell the story of Alex Koufie and I touring the Castle in a later post. It was the most heart-wrenching thing I have ever experienced, witnessing the depths that mankind can sink to.

Before I traveled to Ghana, there were a lot of details to cover. A mosquito net, a yellow fever inoculation (ouch), a prescription for Malarone, reading materials, shorts and t-shirts, a new pair of flip-flops that we call "charlie wortes" which is slang in Ghana for "Charlie, let's go!", and a crash course in the Baha'i guidance on how to establish Junior Youth Groups. The Baha'i community all over the world has been working to assist young people to come together and form their own non-denominational service groups which provide service projects to their local communities. This can be anything from mentoring children to neighborhood beautification efforts. My friend Al Cadena put me on a marathon course to be ready for my trip. The request from the National Spiritual Assembly of Ghana was to have me assist a couple of Baha'i youths, Alex Koufie and Sammy Arthur, who were working in the area with Uncle Prince to try to get these groups together.

My flight to Amsterdam took 11 hours, and I remember feeling that Ghana was a million miles away. I had a lay-over in Amsterdam for several hours. And then it hit me. I was waiting in the terminal for my KLM flight to Accra, and a couple sat next to me speaking Twi. I had not heard the language spoken like this in 24 years and just the sound brought everything flooding back to me.

As I sat there, the clock slowed down. It seemed that the announcement to board the flight was taking forever. I became anxious, wondering if Ghana had changed so much that I would not recognize it. Or worse, had I changed so much that my memories were distorted in time? I had never been to the Fante land. Would I love these people as much as I loved the Asantes in Kumasi?

We boarded the plane and I was one of the first to be seated. I watched Ghanaian business men filing into the plane, impeccably dressed in suits and ties. Women in the traditional kaba, skirt and apron assisting their small children to get to their seats and settle in. A woman sat next to me and I recognized that she was wearing a gold necklace from Ghana. There is no other color of gold

like the gold mined in Obuasi, near Kumasi. It has a beautiful rich hue from the yellow side of the gold spectrum.

I introduced myself by saying, "Awuraa, wo ho te sen?" "Madam, how are you?" She laughed and we were immediately friends. The thing about Ghana is that there is no "trial period" for friendship like we have in the U.S., where we painstakingly take small steps over months and months to establish a friendship. In Ghana, there are strangers and there are friends. And the shelf life of a stranger is a matter of minutes. It felt like everything was going to be OK.

After 9 hours of flight through the night from Amsterdam south over Europe and the Sahara desert, we finally woke up as the plane flew over Ghana approaching Kotoko International Airport. I peered out through the window. It was my Ghana. Forests and plains of a thousand hues of green, cut by dark blue rivers and bright orange clay roads. The plane landed and we disembarked to the terminal. It hit me as I got off the plane. Not only the familiar humidity and tropical heat, but the intangible relaxation of life slowing down, as if there was a collective sigh that every human being was part of.

I got through customs and immigration, and then walked as fast as I could along the long hallway with my rolling suitcase, knowing that at the end of it Akwasi and Mawushi would be waiting. What would they be like? How different was I? Did I remember everything exactly as it was?

"Hey! Yaw!"

There was Mawushi with his head above the others who were waiting for their family members to arrive. And there was Akwasi. I walked up to them. Akwasi and I just stood still for a moment looking at each other, saying nothing, only smiles of disbelief. I touched his cheek, and then his head of gray hair. Mawushi just kept laughing. It was as if time stood still. 24 years were reduced to yesterday. I was looking at my two brothers, seeing ourselves as we did in our youth, but also realizing that many years had gone by - each of us with grey hair, a few extra pounds, and each of us with wrinkles we collected with our responsibilities of adulthood.

"Menum Yaw, akwaaba," Akwasi said, welcoming me as he teared up. "Yo. Me da wo ase, menua," I replied in thanks. Hugs were passed around, and a group bear hug too. I think we were trying to express the permanency of this special relationship, as if there was an unspoken promise that this bond must be cherished and protected for the rest of our lives. It was bittersweet because Nana was not there, but I wouldn't trade that meeting for anything in the world. No gold, no amount of money could replace that homecoming.

Akwasi's wife and children were still living in Cape Coast while he was transitioning to his new position in Accra as one of the regional heads of the Ministry of Mental Health. He stayed at the hospital while working in Accra, so I stayed the next couple days with Mawushi and his family. Mawushi has done an incredible job with improving his house in Accra, near the Lincoln International School where Cecile teaches and the University of Ghana at Legon where Mawushi is a lecturer in French. He has a whole zoo of animals, including a monkey named Gringo, a pet pig, ducks, geese, a couple fish ponds, cats and a dog named Floppy.

After a couple days, it was time to head to Cape Coast. We loaded up Akwasi's car with my luggage, and we were off. Getting out of Accra in traffic is indescribable. It is like nothing I've ever seen in Los Angeles. In 1982, Accra was still a sleepy town, but with the stability Ghana has experienced for 30 years

there has been a boom in a middle class, and whole neighborhoods of beautiful houses, office buildings, high rises, hotels, restaurants and even a shopping mall with a state of the art multiplex movie theater have been built. I was impressed that I got to see the second half of "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows" with digital projection and Dolby sound. There is a saying in Ghana now, "Accra is Ghana and Ghana is Accra." And while I enjoy the conveniences that have developed there, this isn't my Ghana.



We got out of Accra, driving along the coast westward. The roads are vastly improved with very few potholes and excellent asphalt providing a smooth ride. This was far different than the 80's.

And then there was the beautiful countryside that had not changed. This was my Ghana. The wide open fields of tall grasses, palm trees and immense forests of Acacia trees with thousands of bright yellow flowers as far as the eye can see. Villages appearing every few minutes with houses of brown clay walls and thatched roofs, with small boys chasing a bicycle wheel as they roll it with a stick, laughing and waving at the car as we drove by.

I was home. My soul was home. It is a feeling that cannot be forgotten. It's as if your spirit reconnects with this land, your soul sends roots down into this precious soil and everything becomes familiar, comfortable. I was very quiet during that ride. Akwasi had High Life music playing on the radio. We talked a bit about our lives that we had missed out on, but most of all I took in all the sights and sounds of home.

By the time we reached Brafoyaw, it was late. We drove past Moree Junction and then turned left on the small bumpy road up the hill into the village. Small kiosks were still open, selling toothpaste, soap, sponges, onions, tomatoes and mangoes, each lit by candle light and attended by villagers sitting and visiting each other, catching up on gossip and news. We finally stopped at the gate to a house, and out came Uncle Prince with his family to greet me, "Oh, this is very fine. Akwaaba. You are welcome."

My life was about to change forever.

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WEDNESDAY, JUNE 20, 2012

Menua Akwasi



My bond of brotherhood with Akwasi represents everything in Ghana that is sacred to me.

About 6 months into my year there, I'll never forget sitting at lunch with an ex-patriot who said to me, "I pity these

people - they have no real food, no real culture and no real language." I was dumbfounded that this woman had lived in Ghana for 8 years and had come to this horrific conclusion. I'll save my thoughts on racism, prejudice, neo-colonialism and ethnocentrism for later. Right now, I'll share my own insights about what I learned while living there among the people.

The best advice I received before I got to Ghana was to throw making value judgements based on being an American. That value system does not work on the African continent, and if I was to be open I'll discover why. And so I did that. I reminded myself repeatedly as I experienced the Asante culture living in Kumasi to be as Auntie Bea told me, "like a child who walks into a room - mouth shut and eyes wide open."

In southern Ghana, there are 6 major peoples that make up the Akan Society - the Asante in the area of Kumasi and Mampong north of Accra, the Akim in Oda, the Fante in Cape Coast, the Kwahu near Nkawaw, the Krobo near Koforidua and the Akwapem in the hills near Aburi north of Accra. These different peoples established a federal organization as far back as the 11th century, bound by oral traditions. Their languages were not written ones, but everything was carefully recorded to memory by Linguists who are part of the royal court, entrusted with the preservation of the people's histories, lineage and cultures. Additionally, there is the Ga people who migrated to the Accra area hundreds of years ago from the area now known as southern Nigeria and the Ewe people were split by the arbitrary colonial border set up by the British and French between Ghana and Togo.

Later in other stories, I'll get into the details of what held the fabric of this federation together, through a rich culture. It does not separate our lives in this world with the souls of the Nananom Nsamanfo in the afterlife - the Ancestors of our family who have left for the next world and watch out for us. It is a culture that believes that each person is a member of a community and individuality is subordinate to the community's well-being. It treats women and men equally in status in society, as most Akan peoples trace heritage and inheritance matrilineally. It holds true to the belief that children are the greatest gift that any of us can possibly be blessed with in life and our community roles are to be as custodians for God to raise those children for Him. And it is a culture that understands that the burden of life is borne collectively by each of us, and we have a responsibility to take care of those around us so that we are never alone in this world.

Annie once told me that there is an Akan proverb that states, "the African wakes up with the name of God on his lips." This describes my entire experience with

these kind and gentle people. I learned of their beautiful, rich, noble and holy ways largely through my studies in the Art Department at KNUST, while I studied Adinkra symbols, kente cloth and waxprint cloth-making. Later, there will be stories told about each of these.

"Menua Yaw! Me ma wo akye! Wo ho te sen?!" Ghanaians don't just say, "Good morning" like we do. They say with an open and loving heart, "My brother Yaw! I bring you light! How is your spirit?"

I met Akwasi on the same night I met Nana Boateng. I'm 5'6" tall, and we are about the same height. But his presence and his incredible intellect intimidated me - as if he was the biggest person in the room - until I got to know him better. He came from a humble background in Kumasi, born to a big Asante family and the first in his family to go to the university. He and I understood what this was like, having to navigate through the education system with no assistance or advice from our parents since they were not educated. And for an intellect like Akwasi's, he didn't take on just any discipline. He was a medical student. While Nana and I would get excited talking about oil pastels, paints and charcoal, light and shadows, Akwasi would light up telling us how hemoglobin worked with the respiratory system to oxygenate blood, or recite from memory every muscle in the human body. He had a passion for medicine.

He invited me once to go to Komfo Anokye Teaching Hospital, where he did his clinical work assisting in the maternity ward. During the 1980's, medicine and medical supplies were hard to come by in Ghana so doctors were more like miracle workers, especially with the delivery of babies when mortality rates were high and it was almost impossible to create a sterile environment to prevent infection. Akwasi was brave; so resolute to be a master of his education and fearless to put it to use. But more importantly, I realized during that visit to the hospital that he had a burning love for mankind which defined his life's purpose.

We recently talked about each of our paths to finding the Baha'i Faith and how we decided to become Baha'is.

I was a strange child who started searching for truth when I was 12 years old, not satisfied with the answers from the priest at St. Therese Parish in San Diego where I grew up. Why were some people saved simply because of geography, while most of the rest of the world was not? Why did those people have a faith that they also dedicated their lives to in the same way we did, but we say that their beliefs are not from God? Why do I have to depend on the authority of the priesthood to tell me how to interpret what I can read for myself? The response was always the same, to "accept it on faith and don't ask questions."

At 15 years old, I first studied Hinduism after reading "Kalki", a fictional account of the return of Krishna written by Gore Vidal. That lead me to Judaism, Buddhism and Islam. I read the Koran on my own, and fell in love with the confirmations it gave me as a Christian and its lessons about compassion. I found commonalities and a truth in each of them, but something was always missing as well. I knew that I was looking for faith that would address the needs of our current world. I had not found that yet.

When I was 17, our neighbor across the street sent me to Moloka'i, Hawaii to work for her brother. She and Mike were Baha'is. This was all my mother knew - the name - and she told me the morning before I got on the plane to make sure I don't talk to the Baha'is because she was sure I'd have to shave my head. Try telling that to a 17 year old boy.

When I got there, I immediately read a book called "Release The Sun" by William Sears about the early history of the Faith. I learned that Bahai's believe in the oneness of God, the oneness of Mankind, that science and religion must go hand in hand, that God sends divine messengers known as Manifestations, such as Moses, Jesus, Krishna, Buddha and Mohammad to educate mankind and to guide us in our progress. And in the late 1800's, God sent us another Manifestation named Baha'u'llah, Arabic for the Glory of God, to bring teachings to unite mankind and fulfill the promise of world peace as the previous Manifestations had all foretold. Nine days later, I became a Baha'i. This was what I was looking for.

During the early years of the Baha'i Faith as it spread over the globe, dedicated Baha'is took up the brave task of leaving their homes to settle in other countries in order to share the news. One such man was Enoch Olinga who left his home in Uganda at the request of Shoghi Effendi in 1953, settling in the Cameroons. Mr. Olinga in turn sent David and Esther Tanyi from the Cameroons in 1954 to bring the Baha'i Faith to Ghana. They are honored in Baha'i history as Knights of Baha'u'llah for their courageous service. Uncle David and Auntie Esther lived in Kumasi and were like family to me. Uncle David always smiled even during the tough times of the drought, and Auntie Esther was quiet and always prayerful. They had an older son named Enoch who was ahead of me in the university, and two younger teenage sons named Kwame and Yaw. Kwame and I became very close friends. We had a connection because we came from cultures outside of Ghana, and knew what it was like to be an outsider at times. Kwame was like a younger brother to all of us, and we assisted him with tutoring and watched out for him so that he could get into the university. Tragically, we lost Kwame in 1983 to Sickle Cell Anemia.

Akwasi's story of becoming a Baha'i is far different than mine. He went to the firesides I had previously mentioned at the Shapiros home at KNUST for over a year. He went with the intent to discredit the Baha'i Faith since he was a devout Christian and suspected that the Baha'i Faith was contrary to his belief. Enoch Tanyi also went to those firesides, so one day Akwasi - always the studious intellectual - brought a handwritten list of no less than 300 difficult questions about the Baha'i Faith's perspective on complex Christian doctrine. He told Enoch that if Enoch could answer the questions, he would become a Baha'i. Enoch was clever, and answered 200 of the questions. But he told Akwasi that he had to find the answers to the last 100 on his own, and made his library of Baha'i books available to Akwasi. Akwasi told me that as he researched the Writings of Baha'u'llah, his heart softened and he came to the conclusion that he was a Baha'i. He gave in to his heart and became one of the strongest, most educated and fearless proponents of the Baha'i Faith I have ever known in my life. He later served for many years in many capacities of the administration of the Baha'i Faith, including being a member of the National Spiritual Assembly which is elected to steer the national community.

Akwasi also recognized my passion for the Akan traditions. I recall that one day he took me out to a village outside of town, and we met a Fetish Priestess. We sat with her for hours at a time, over the course of many visits, asking her about the traditional beliefs, what her role was in the village community and how herbal medicine worked. Akwasi patiently translated for me. It was absolutely riveting. I learned that traditional religious beliefs and herbal medicine play very important roles in the village community. The Fetish Priestess is responsible for the spiritual well being of the community, as well as the physical health of its members. She is the mid-wife who is responsible for the delivery of children and she is the one to help assist with a person's journey through death, providing spiritual support to the family members and providing comfort to the dying so that they can pass with dignity and grace.

When my engagement dissolved, it was as if my soul was stuck in anger and something had died inside. And still, not one day went by that I didn't think about Ghana. I'd lay in bed at night and close my eyes, trying try to remember every detail. The sight of a thunder storm approaching from the distance over the dark green canopy of the rain forest, with lightening bolting out of black clouds as the wind picked up. The sounds of roosters crowing in the morning and the laughter of women as they walked at the crack of dawn to the market. The sights of men and women in traditional cloth on Saturday mornings on the way to funerals. The sounds of the tailor clacking his scissors to let people know he was walking through the neighborhood with his sewing machine balanced on his head. I'd remember Akwasi, Nana and I walking on the grounds of our beautiful campus. I'd remember the nights Annie and I would stay up until dawn with Andrew, Lisa, and Christina, talking about everything imaginable and laughing so hard it hurt. I'd remember the trips to the villages, walking along footpaths while tropical birds sang and monkeys yelled from the top of the canopy hundreds of feet above us. I'd remember the wrinkled faces of kind old village women who would greet me and feed me, give me a place to sleep in their mud huts and make me - a complete stranger - feel at home, part of their families and loved.

When I found Akwasi in 2009, it was after such a long period of darkness in my life that I was terrified he would turn away from me or hold resentment towards me for having cut off contact. It didn't happen. Instead, it was as if I had never left and the years and years of isolation had never happened. I was met with love and understanding. Akwasi helped turn me in the right direction to finding my way home. I was about to go home.

Posted by Dennis Hunter at 9:05 PM No comments:

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MONDAY, JUNE 18, 2012

Una Hermana From Ghana



I read that there are three people in our lives that are so influential that they mold who we are. Nana was one. Akwasi is one. And Annie is one.

It became practically a

ritual each night at Tech that a few of us would walk to Tech Junction just outside the university gate to get kelewele from our favorite seller. Kelewele to Ghanaians is like popcorn to Americans. In a huge cast-iron pot, oil is brought to a boil over an open fire. Ripe plantain is cut up into bite-sized pieces, marinated in ginger, onion, pepper and salt. It's then fried until golden brown, mixed with roasted peanuts and served in a cone of rolled up brown paper. It's like peppery fried heaven.

One night Nana, Osei, Lisa and I got our kelewele and took a walk into Bomso, a neighborhood adjacent to another university gate. A group of young people about my age were standing on the porch of a house, talking and laughing. The electricity had gone out, so everyone had come outside to wait for the lights to come back on. Lisa had arrived in Kumasi a few months before I did, so she was familiar with everyone.

Lisa stopped to greet everyone, and Anna Lisa Ben-George immediately called me out on my shyness. "You don't talk to strangers, do you? Cat got your tongue? Well, we'll have none of that!" She's been my sister for 30 years now.

Annie's father is Fante and her mother is from Spain. Annie was brought up instilled with the values that both her cultures were important and that she was to find her strength in each of them. She speaks beautiful Twi and Spanish, and can tell you about details from the customs of the Akan that even well-read professors are not familiar with.

Their home was just behind our house on Ridge Road at the university. Lisa and I would take the foot path each Saturday to go call on the Ben-George family. Approaching the house, there was a bird perch on the porch for Auntie Maria's parrot named Kita. That parrot was amazing. I swear he had a sense of humor. He could imitate Auntie Maria's voice and would call the house boy, "Akenene! Akenene! Come! Akenene!" The house boy would come running from behind the house, and then start cursing when he realized it was Kita. And Kita would laugh at him!

Kumasi is an incredible mixture of cultures and histories. I sat for hours with a Fetish Priestess in order to learn more about the traditional religious beliefs of Nyame & Nyamewaa, the Abosom and herbal medicine. Kumasi also has a long history with the Catholic Faith, establishing schools and hospitals. And because Kumasi has the biggest open air market in all of West Africa, it's where the Moslem cultures from the north merge with the south. I loved waking up each morning hearing the the adhan, or call to prayer, from the minaret of the mosque across town.

When we met, Annie was finishing secondary school at Ahmadiyya Secondary School in Kumasi. Ahmadiyya is a reformist Moslem movement that was formed in British Colonial India in the 19th century. One of their accomplishments has been to establish excellent schools throughout sub-saharan Africa.

One of my favorite dishes in Ghana is something called waakye (pronounced waa-chay). It's rice that is cooked with a special leaf to turn the water a brownish purple, and cooked with beans. It's served with a layer of spaghetti noodles, a hard-boiled egg, and shito - which is a pepper sauce made from ground roasted peppers, dried shrimp and spices. The best waakye available in Kumasi was from a woman who would set up a table right as school was letting out at Ahmadiyya. We'd get there a half an hour early to wait in line and hold a spot for Annie, hoping to get some. The cook would arrive with a mountain of waakye in a huge metal bowl. She sold out quickly every day she set up her little shop. I loved that waakye, and I will always remember Annie reminding me to watch for stones in the rice.

Annie became a Baha'i a year or two before I came to Ghana. There were gatherings called firesides at the home of an American Baha'i couple who were teaching at the university, Barry and Mahnaz Shapiro. Many students came to these firesides to hear about the Baha'i Faith, and many would become Baha'is. Maybe this is why Annie and I became such close friends. We are the only

Baha'is in each of our families, and we found our respective paths on our own terms.

And that's the most striking thing about Annie that I admire and hope to live up to. She lives her life according to her own terms. She is fearless, making up her own mind in her own time. She is like a rock. Sometimes I ask her where her inner strength comes from, because it seems that everyone depends on Annie or calls on Annie for advice. She says it comes from her faith in God.

Don't get me wrong though, she can be serious but she's also got the most wicked sense of humor I have ever witnessed. Annie can disarm you with laughter. Just ask her to tell a story, and it's in the details. She can pick up on the smallest things and make you laugh so hard that you'll stop breathing.

Annie makes everything fun. During the first few weeks of March, Baha'is observe a Fast for 19 days until the first day of Spring, with no food or drink from sunrise to sunset. I've always found that the Fast causes my heart to be closer to God. It reminds me of the sacrifice that we are all asked to make, to clear the soul of attachment and to be gently reminded of where our focus needs to be.

In Ghana, the time of the Fast is also during the Harmattan winds. From the end of January until April when the rains start, dry winds and dust blow down from the Sahara desert. The days are very hot and dry and it gets cold at night. In the afternoon, the sky turns orange with the dust and the sun turns blood red.

We still had work to do, so on weekends we would go out to the villages outside of Kumasi to visit the Baha'i communities and assist them with getting a better knowledge of their faith. A group of us youth would trek out in Tro-Tros.

I have to explain the concept of riding in a Tro-Tro. The origin of the name Tro-Tro comes from the Ga people who are concentrated in Accra. The Ga word "tro" means "three pence" from the British colonial money. In the colonial days, they charged passengers three pence per trip on mass transit. The name stuck. Back in 1982, a Tro-Tro was a flat bed truck with a cab built over the back, with three long benches running the length of the flat bed. People, sometimes with their goats, chickens or barrels of tomatoes would all pile in. The Tro-Tro driver would let the truck roll forward a few feet, slam on the brakes, and magically a few more seats would appear as everyone slid forward on the benches to be squashed into the hips of the person next to you.

I'd be smashed in between two market women, barely able to breathe, and Annie would sit directly across from me and say something, knowing the market women do not speak English, to make me turn beet red. "She on your right wants to take you home and get you naked." "She on the left wants to take you home and spank you like a little boy." She wouldn't laugh, just roll her eyes as all of us would burst into laughter.

By the end of the day after visiting a few villages and being packed in Tro-Tros while sweating like crazy in the heat, water and rest were a gift from God. We'd all get home and Auntie Bea would have iced kenkey (somewhere between the taste of rice milk and a milk shake) waiting for us to break the Fast at sundown. We'd all collapse on the floor in the sitting room under the ceiling fan, laughing about everything that happened that day. Annie was always the instigator of laughter, telling stories of everything that had happened that day, who we met, and who made us smile.

When the economy and drought got very bad in Ghana, Annie and her family moved to London to start their lives again. She got married, raised two gorgeous

children and got her Bachelors Degree, then her Masters Degree, working full time and going to the university at night. She has courage that comes from her faith. Sometimes people ask me about how I could be so brave to move to Ghana for a year when I was young. I don't have courage like Annie does. She has an ability to meet any situation head on, face it without fear, and make the best of it. And even then, she keeps her sense of humor.

One time I came to visit in London and her husband was perplexed by how much the two of us could talk. We didn't sleep for two days straight, sitting up talking, eating, drinking tea and talking some more. Her husband was so confused, so he finally interrupted and asked us both, "why on earth don't you ever run out of things to talk about?" We just don't. It's been that way for thirty years now. We get on the phone and I have to watch the clock because I could go broke with the phone charges to London. Sometimes hours go by and suddenly it's 3:00AM in London and Annie has to go to work in the morning.

I tell my American friends that Ghana is like the mafia - once you're in the family, you never get out. Annie's got that kind of love for me, and it's something I have depended on for these thirty years. She never judges, she always listens, she gives everything she has and then adds some of the greatest advice and wisdom.

If life ever gets difficult, I know I'll come out the other side relatively unscathed. It's because I have Annie on my side.

Posted by Dennis Hunter at 8:41 PM 2 comments:

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WEDNESDAY, JUNE 13, 2012

A Great Friend Part II



It might appear that I'm telling the end of my story, when this is actually the beginning.

Towards the end of 1982, the situation in Ghana became much worse, partly due to the drought that the

continent of Africa had not seen in decades, but also because of the increasing difficulty caused by the military government.

We were tired from hunger. We were down to two meals a day because of the shortages of food. Fufu was a scarce luxury, as was kenkey. Since maize was still available, we ate a mashed form of it called Banku every day.

Even still, I had work to do. During my last month before I left the country, I lived among the Kusase people in the village of Timonde in the north, near the border of Burkina Faso. The Baha'i community had done something revolutionary by sponsoring a tutorial school for farm children at no cost to their families. I was

there to assist the teacher to settle in, and to help the Baha'i community to further their understanding of the administrative process of the Baha'i Faith.

Getting there was a challenge. I rode on the top of the cab of an eighteen wheeler transport truck, directly above the driver. It was amazing, with the wind blowing while I rode through the sub-Saharan scrub land, past beautiful villages of round clay huts. Thousands of exotic birds would fly along side the truck as we made our way along the winding dirt roads through fields of yams and millet. The millet fields were like oceans of long grass, waving in the wind as far as I could see. Since the curfew was in effect nation-wide, we had to sleep on the side of the road. Even that was an adventure, since we could hear animals howling in the night. It took 18 hours to drive to Bolgatanga, then I took a taxi for 2 hours to Zebilla, and then walked for 5 miles through the millet fields to Timonde. When I arrived, the villagers formally greeted me. Tall men shook my hand and inquired about the health of my family. The women knelt and offered their hand while patting me on the back and asking about my own well being. The small children screamed and ran in horror. They called me the ghost. They had never seen a white man. There was no electricity and no running water. This was as far away as it possibly gets from any reference I had to my own life.

I stayed with the chief of Timonde, a very quiet but imposing man. He was tall - probably 6'5" - and walked with such grace that it was as if his feet did not touch the ground. He had three stunningly beautiful wives and 10 children who worked very hard on their farm. His senior wife allowed me to come into her kitchen and watch as she and the two junior wives prepared our meals.

The chief's house was a very large compound of round rooms made with clay walls from mud and dung, and covered with thatched roofs. The construction was ingenious because the clay dried hard, and was then hand-polished. Each compound also had a polished clay floor. It was spotless, and the walls and floors were decorated with intricate abstract designs that told the stories of the Ancestors and mankind.

The chief honored me by giving me the room with the most spiritual significance to his home. It was the room that held the fetish. It was a matted ball of feathers and blood, twice the size of a basketball and used in ceremonial sacrifices to the Ancestral gods for good crops and healthy children. The beauty of the Baha'i Faith is that we are advised to honor our cultures and to incorporate them in our love of God. The chief was proud of his culture and I was humbled by this gesture that he would have me stay in the holiest place in his home.

The Baha'i Faith is like no other religious community, in that there is no clergy. An elected body of nine representatives called the Local Spiritual Assembly is charged with carrying out the administration of the community. Each year an election is held with no campaigning, no fund raising, no speeches.

Timonde was a fascinating experience because the entire village was made up of Baha'is. No one was literate, so we had to devise a way to help the community to elect its Local Spiritual Assembly while preserving the obligation of anonymity while casting votes. We had the community sit in a circle facing each other, and then one by one each person dropped a pebble in a hole behind each of the nine people they chose to serve.

There was a young man there who could translate the Kusase language for me. One night, as the chief's eldest son Kuma and I sat on goat skins near a fire looking at the stars, we talked about what we wanted out of life. He told me he wanted an education, to be able to see the world and provide a good life to his family. This young man's life was as far removed from mine as it can possibly

get, and yet he was so much like me. The chief came out afterwards and sat with us. A few days prior to this he had asked me about my family name, and he was very pleased that it was Hunter. That night, he presented me with a rolled up piece of handwoven cloth. He unrolled it for me, and there was a mud painting depicting a hunter in ceremonial dress and mask, hunting an antelope and a guinea fowl. I have that painting framed in my living room.

I was fascinated by the farming techniques they used. Guinea fowl are beautiful birds with grey feathers and white heads. They have the capability of full flight, but the Kusase would trick them by taking the eggs and having chicken hens raise the chicks. They never learn how to fly and run freely through the compound. The livestock is kept at night in a large room in the compound. At first this seemed strange to have them penned so close to where we slept, but then I realized that the body heat from 5 head of cattle generates efficient heat for the entire house on cold nights.

To this day, I still think of the chief, Kuma and their family. The Kusase are a quiet and incredibly noble people. Their music was inspiring to the soul. Their love of God and their faith humbled me. In that month I learned more about the concept of faith in God than I could have learned in a lifetime living in the United States.

The trip back to Kumasi was alarming, and it was an indication of the tension created by the drought, the military and the public. While getting through the military check point in Bolgatanga, I was pulled into a shack and questioned for being a CIA spy. I prayed for protection as a drunken soldier waived a Russian machine gun in my face. I repeatedly reminded him I was a student and showed him my ID card. He finally gave up and motioned me to get out of his shack.

When I got back to Kumasi, there were reports coming from Accra that expatriots were being hassled and beaten. I had to quickly decide what to do, because there was a threat that the universities would close again because of student protests. Should I stay another year, or get back to school in the States? I consulted with Auntie Bea and Uncle Ben, and it became clear that I needed to go back and finish my degree. I had wanted to stay, but the risk was too great. I packed and in a few days I was ready to go to Accra and get on a plane.

Nana was heartbroken by my decision. For two days he didn't speak. By that time, we were roommates at Independence Hall at the university. I would catch him looking at me, saddened. The day came for me to head to Accra, and he told me that he and some of my friends would see me off. What I didn't realize was that there were 10 of my friends with Nana and everyone rode the bus for 5 hours to Accra to see me off at the airport. That goodbye was one of the most difficult things I have experienced in life. I know that Nana had a very hard time with it as well.

He and I stayed in touch by writing letters, about once a week. I would tell him about my studies in the Art Department at San Diego State University. He would tell me about his latest waxprint project for school, or the kente weaving he was working on. At the end of each letter, he would ask me when I was coming back.

There was someone else I kept in touch with, and after 4 years we finally decided to ask for the consent of our parents to get married, according to Baha'i marriage laws.

I flew back to Ghana in 1986 to speak with her parents about the consent. My friend Mawushi Nutakor picked me up at the airport. After 4 years I felt like I had never left. It was that feeling you have when you walk through the door of your

home after being away on a trip. Nana met me in Kumasi, and I remember he practically smothered me with a hug. I stayed for a month with Nana as my host, as he orchestrated the coordination of this meeting for marriage consent.

During that time Nana took me on a trip to his hometown Oda in the lands of the Akim, his people. His mother was a farmer, raising all kinds of crops as well as beautiful white pigs. Her house was simple, and I bathed from a bucket of water each night, standing on a slab of concrete in the moonlight. Nana took me everywhere in Oda - where he went to primary school, where he went to church, and to his secondary school where he painted a beautiful mural entitled "Adua". The title comes from the Adua dance, which is very traditional in the Akan cultures. He depicted a woman dancing with a scarf in her hand, and drummers and musicians surrounding her. Nana was sharing his life with me, and he told me that in order for me to understand a brother, I must know his history.

Once the consent was granted, it was about time for me to get back to the States.

A few days before I left, Nana and I spent the day in his flat. We didn't say much and it reminded me vividly of the first days that I got to know him, when he would come to visit me to keep me from getting homesick. Nana suddenly became very serious and asked me to sit down so he could talk with me. He was so serious and his heart was heavy. It was puzzling because he was so happy that I was there. He attempted to tell me something, but he stumbled to find the words. Finally, he grabbed my hand and almost crushed my fingers, and he told me he was not nearly as strong in his faith as I was and he prayed that I would not judge him for decisions he was about to make in his life. I told him that I would never judge him, and that he was my brother. I didn't realize that this was a plea for help.

Nana took me to the airport and in front of my fiancé, our friends and a crowded airport, Nana completely broke down. This bear of a man sobbed like a child, taking both my hands and refusing to let go. With tears running down his face and sobbing uncontrollably, he told me that he would never forget his brother Yaw and that he would never have a friend like me ever again. He gave me a bracelet that I wear today and told me there is a belief that the bracelet is modeled after a type of grass that grows in the villages. No matter if you dig it up or try to burn it out, the grass will always grow back. This bracelet is given to a close friend to signify the importance of that bond. He told me to remember that no matter what, we were like that grass.

A year after I got back to the States and cabled my fiancé to let her know her visa was approved, her plane ticket was ready and our wedding plans were set, she cabled me back after a month and let me know she needed more time because she felt rushed. But after that, I never heard from her again. Two years after that telegram, I discovered that during the entire time of our engagement, she had been dating someone else and married him within a week of the time I let her know her visa had been granted to come to the U.S.

The betrayal was blinding. The anger was a test that I could not bear. I was so angry that I cut myself off from everyone I knew in Ghana. I didn't want anything to do with that country. It was the biggest mistake I have ever made.

I poured myself into my career and for years became obsessed with having a bigger job title with a bigger office, losing contact with everyone in Ghana as I tried to destroy the memories. The anger got the best of me and I stayed away from the Baha'i community too. I tried my best to forget, but I could not destroy the memories. I finally told myself that one day I would somehow find Akwasi

and Nana, and catch up with them. One day I would go back to visit. It would be like it had always been. But it just wasn't the right time yet because of my career, because of a lack of time, because of money. But one day I would go.

Then in 2009, 23 years after my last trip to Ghana, I found Akwasi through Facebook. We exchanged emails and phone numbers, and I called him. After a lot of tears and a lot of catching up, I begged Akwasi for Nana's phone number so that I could call him immediately! Akwasi became quiet. He told me I must not have heard the news. Nana had died alone in his house in Accra while his wife and children were in Oda. The neighbors had suspected something was wrong because for two days they had not seen him leave the house. They sent their house boy to see if Nana was OK, and he found him in bed. He had died in his sleep alone.

It felt like the wind had been knocked out of my lungs. I couldn't speak and it felt like someone was standing on my chest. I asked Akwasi if I could get off the phone so that I could deal with this news. I hung up the phone and cried. It was hurt that came from a place deep in my soul. It was the pain of having lost the most influential person in my life, and it was the pain of having let him down when he had asked me to be there for him. The guilt was overwhelming. I didn't sleep for three days. I laid awake at night, remembering all of those times at the university in Nana's studio, laughing and talking while we studied. I put Nana's bracelet on and promised him I would not take it off again.

I decided that the only way I could cope with the pain and guilt was to serve the Baha'i community in Ghana, so I made plans that I would take my vacation and go back for a month to assist the Baha'is in whatever way I could - and to dedicate my trip to Nana.

The direction of my life was about to change.

Later, I'll tell the story about how Nana orchestrated everything that happened during that trip. He had also strayed from the Baha'i community like I had, and I think Nana made a deal with God that if he could help set me back on course, then he would get to experience his own reckoning as well.

I don't think we ever quite get over the loss of a loved one. We get past it. We learn to cope with it. But we never get over it. Especially the loss of someone who gives us more than just friendship. This was my friend who gave me my name and guided me on my path to becoming part of the Akan people. Sometimes I feel that I was never worthy to have such a friend. Even now I cry - not because Nana passed away, but because I failed my test from God and I lost precious moments with someone so important to me. And most of all, because he had asked me for help and I wasn't there for him.

Posted by Dennis Hunter at 10:47 PM 1 comment:

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TUESDAY, APRIL 24, 2012

A Great Friend - Part I

I have read this entry over and over, and tried my best to convey from my heart the meaning of friendship.



The trip from Accra to Kumasi took 5 hours by bus, stopping at military check points at each town that we passed through where we were searched and questioned by the soldiers. The ride through the rainforest was magical. Trees so high, thick with vines, and a hundred shades of green. The wonderful rhythm of High Life music on the stereo system in the bus kept everyone in good spirits.

I settled in living with the Asare family. Uncle Ben Asare was the Dean of the Agriculture Department at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology which we referred to as "Tech", and he also served as the Chairman of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Ghana. Auntie Bea served as an Auxiliary Board Member and later as the Continental Counselor for West Africa. They had 3 daughters away at school and a son named Andrew who would be my roommate before I moved into the dormitories. Another American girl named Lisa Molin was also doing her year of service and lived with the Asares as well.

I met Nana at the Baha'i Feast. Every 19 days, the Baha'is have a gathering to pray, discuss issues & challenges, and to enjoy each others' company. I remember how far away I felt from home. I sat and waited quietly for people to arrive, wondering what they would be like. Then, two students arrived - Akwasi Osei and Nana Abora Boateng. Nana had a presence that filled a room. I tend to be quiet around people I don't know, but Nana wasn't about to let that happen. He had this infectious sense of humor with which he could disarm anyone. He asked me, "Why are you so very quiet? In Ghana there is no room for shyness!"

It's the custom in Ghana to walk a guest half way home. When Feast was over and Akwasi and Nana were leaving, Nana said to me, "Small boy, you must learn our customs. Come and walk with us." Nana and I took the lead, while Akwasi and Lisa were behind us. He made me laugh. I felt after all I had experienced in Accra with the military, that maybe I could give Ghana a chance and that I'd have some friends here. As we walked, I discovered that Nana was an art student, so we had a lot in common. It was easy to talk to him. We talked about everything - Picasso and Degas, and who would win the Africa Cup that year. The next morning I showed him my portfolio of drawings I would submit to the university for review. That was it - he said we were brothers.

Visits are expected in the Akan culture - unannounced, but always welcome. Auntie Bea always had food on the stove. I asked her why, and she told me that you just never knew who would be showing up. One afternoon Nana arrived unannounced with his portfolio. I looked at some of his drawings he brought to share with me. His work was beautiful and he had incredible talent. He used bright colors and drew about life in the villages, women carrying clay vessels of water on their heads, drummers playing the talking drums and babies carried on the backs of their mothers on the way to the market. While he had a gift for drawing, his passion was for textiles so he was studying kente weaving and wax print design. Later on he would show me his loom at his studio at Tech.

The next day Nana came to visit again.

And the day after that.

And the day after that.

I finally asked him in my suspicious, arrogant American way, "Why do you keep coming to visit me?" Nana replied, "Because you are so far away from home and I don't want you to be lonely." He just looked at me and I became quiet. In America, we have friends because we do things together - we go to movies, we go to football games, we play basketball together. This was different. Sometimes Nana would come over just to keep me company; he wouldn't say a word, just do his school work or write letters while I studied. He felt that just being in the room was enough to cure homesickness. It made sense because African children do not grow up alone. Companionship is God-given so there's no such thing as loneliness or isolation in the Akan culture. We all help to carry the burden of life on each others' shoulders. And Africans see right through all of our stuff, getting past the wall we so carefully build in our American lives - right into our souls. The trade off for such vulnerability is a sense of belonging. It's worth it.

As the months went by Nana, Akwasi and I became inseparable. Across campus, you could always hear someone yelling, "There goes THE THREE!" We were nicknamed The Three Muskateers.

Nana patiently taught me words and phrases in Twi, the language of the Akan. There are 6 major peoples - the Akim, Asante, Akwapim, Fante, Krobo and Kwahu. Except for the Asante, each speak their own language along with Twi. Soon I was understanding and speaking so well that Auntie Bea remarked that the family would have to speak in Akwapim because I knew too much.

Nana also taught me about the Akan proverbs and the Adinkra symbols that I would later study at Tech. Beautiful Adinkra proverbs and symbols like "*Gye Nyame*", which means "except God." Everything in life is a blessing from God and nothing is given to us without God's mercy. "*Bi nka bi*" which means "no one should bite the other," signifying the importance of unity and acceptance of everyone in our community. The symbols are carefully carved into stamps made from calabashes and printed on cloth to tell a story depending on the order the symbols are stamped in. Adinkra cloth is traditionally worn by the royalty of the Asante tribe on special occasions.



I think fufu was initially my way in to the culture. Nana was amazed that I loved the food and could eat fufu. Most white people who come to Ghana have a hard time with food because it can be very spicy and the textures are not something we are used to. Fufu is the national dish. It's made from pounded cassava and plantain, making a starchy dough that is dipped in soup with the fingers and then sort of swallowed and chewed. Nana would say, "My brother, you have tried!" I love fufu. To this day I have cravings for it. It's soul food that sticks to my ribs and to my heart, making me feel comforted and rested.

Nana and I spent a lot of time in villages partly helping with research for the Art Department at Tech, but also to assist the Baha'i Community to educate the Baha'is in the area. What I realized was that Nana was helping to bridge the gap between the people and me. Whites are treated with great hospitality, but it's understood that they typically do not know the culture, they don't speak the language and do not eat the food. Nana's education connected me with the people. In the villages, I was humbled at the respect that I was accorded simply because I showed a love and appreciation for the food and the language. But more importantly, Nana's education awoke something inside of me. It was as if I had known these people my entire life. I loved their culture and I felt comfortable with them. In fact, there was no them, it became us. The more I learned, the more I identified with these people - treasuring what it meant to be part of the history of generations and interconnected in a community. I discovered what it felt like to wake up in the morning secure and happy, and to experience laughter from deep inside my soul.

We went to spend a weekend in a remote village north of Kumasi near Mampong, helping new Baha'is to establish their own community in their village. That night I felt a peace that I had never felt in my life. We had been fed so much good food that we could not breathe. It was important to eat everything or risk insulting the cook. People were outdoors, sitting and quietly chatting and playing oware, enjoying the cool evening breeze. A traditional choir was singing hymnals in Twi. Deep in the rainforest, we could hear the talking drums conversing between two villages. Monkeys chattered way up in the tops of the silk cotton trees. Life was not complicated, it was essential.

Very late one night while I was studying, Nana came and grabbed me from my desk. He walked me out into the rainforest outside the gate to Tech. The sky was heavy with stars, sparkling through the high branches of the rainforest canopy created by the silk cotton trees. Birds were still singing and Bush Babies were yelling out their night calls. Nana refused to tell me what we were up to until he found a certain spot where the full moon was directly over us in a clearing. He brought out a flask of water while asking what day I was born on. I told him it was a Thursday. Nana poured the water onto the ground while reciting a prayer. This was my naming ceremony.

Nana Nyame, mekyere wo nsu, na menma wo nsu
Nana Nyamewaa, mekyere wo nsu, na menma wo nsu
Osoro, gye nsu nom
Asaase Afua, gye nsu nom
Abosom nyinaa, gye nsu nom
Abusuafo pa, gye nsu nom
Me Ntoro, gye nsu nom
Nananom Nsamanfo, gye nsu nom
Me Asamanfo pa, gye nsu nom

In this prayer, an offering of water is made to Nyame and Nyamewaa - the masculine and feminine forms of God, to the Abosom who are the deities who protect all of nature, and to the Nananom Nsamanfo who are the generations of our Ancestors who have past on from this world to the next, watching out for us, keeping balance in our lives.

Nana then had me face him. He put a hand on each of my shoulders and told me that from this day on I was Akanfo, meaning a member of the Akan family. And I was given my kraden, which is my soul's name, Yaw - which is the Akan name given to boys born on a Thursday. It is believed that the the souls of infants wait in a pool of collective consciousness, and when the time is right the kra - or soul - of the child chooses its parents and finds its way down to this

world from the next one. The kra attaches itself to the baby upon conception. The kraden is used in the context of great affection by family members. My name comes from the spirit of Awuo - the planet Jupiter - which is my Abosom and part of my soul. The spirit of Yaw is guided by Preko the great boar who is focused, determined and not easily discouraged. With this ceremony, I became one of the people and I joined the lineage of generations that go back for centuries, their names remembered by the Linguist who keeps the oral traditions and records of our families.

From that day on, I never heard Nana or Akwasi call me Dennis. I am Yaw.

This is the greatest gift that I have ever received.

Posted by Dennis Hunter at 5:31 PM No comments:

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MONDAY, MARCH 5, 2012

Arise to Serve and Machine Guns



Everyone who is a Baha'i has a moment of realizing that this Faith is bigger than we are, and our hearts change. We become filled with an overwhelming love for God, realizing that our calling in life will be in service to humanity.

My moment was at the North American Baha'i Youth Conference in 1981, held in Kansas City. I was 19 years old,

and crazy enough to agree to drive with 5 other youth all the way to Kansas City from San Diego, each of us driving in 6 hour shifts for the 36 hour trip. Yes, no stopping, we'd drive the whole way. In Kansas City, I stayed in a hotel room with 20 other guys from San Diego, each of us laid out on the floor, around the bed, in the bathroom - I think someone even found some room by sleeping half way in the closet.

The opening talk was given at the Kansas City Convention Center. I remember walking into the arena and looking around to see 10,000 Baha'i youth from all over the U.S., Canada, Hawaii, Mexico and even as far as Europe. This was my moment of confirmation. It was humbling, looking at all these faces of young people from different racial backgrounds and cultures - knowing that all of us believed in the oneness of mankind and the promise of a better world through the teachings of Baha'u'llah, whom Baha'is believe to be the Manifestation of God for this time.

After Baha'u'llah passed away in 1892, He named His son Abdu'l Baha to be His successor and the Center of the Covenant. In turn upon Abdu'l Baha's passing, He asked the Baha'is to turn to His grandson, Shoghi Effendi, to help guide the worldwide Baha'i Community in 1921.

Shoghi Effendi's widow, Ruhiyyih Khanum, gave that opening talk. As a youth, she was my hero. She had gone on great adventures, like riding in a boat up the Amazon River and driving across sub-Saharan Africa in a Land Rover, spreading the teachings of the Baha'i Faith. Her life was what I dreamed about, because I wanted to travel and see the world. She spoke about a new concept coming from the World Center of the Baha'i Faith in Haifa, Israel. It was about youth offering one year of service to a Baha'i Community in another country. I was in.

During the early part of the 20th century, Shoghi Effendi entrusted a great deal of responsibility for the growth and protection of the Baha'i Faith to a handful of Baha'is he called The Hands of the Cause. His wife was a Hand of the Cause, and so was Mr. Ali-Akbar Furutan, who was a great educator and an advocate for youth. During the conference, every time I came into the lobby of our hotel I would see Mr. Furutan sitting on a couch in the lobby. Each time I walked by I would smile and wave, too shy to say hello. One morning he was sitting alone, and he patted the seat on the couch next to him, motioning me to come and sit. We talked about what it was like for me to be a Baha'i youth, and the only Baha'i in my family. I told him I wanted to do a year of service, but I had just finished my first year in the university and I wasn't sure what to do. Should I leave school and go for a year? Should I stay in school and wait until my degree was finished? Mr. Furutan smiled at me and said, "why not do both?"

After trying for months to get a visa to go to school in Colombia, and finally being told that Americans were discouraged to go there due to the danger caused by the drug cartel, my good friend Cristy Athan returned from spending the summer in Ghana, travel teaching and assisting the Baha'i Community. I told her about my dead end with Colombia, and she asked me if I would consider Ghana. Sure, why not?

Right as everything was set for a couple of us to go to Ghana, a military coup occurred on December 31, 1981. The borders were closed and the airport was shut down. We decided to still go, waiting 9 days until the airport reopened. After a 12 hour flight to London, we flew to Ghana. It was another 8 hours of flying. I will never forget that I had a window seat, and I could look out over the Sahara Desert. It was like a vast ocean of burnt orange sand, and I could see the paths that were originally used by camels on the Moslem Trade Route, carrying spices and fabrics into tropical Africa.

We arrived at Kotoko Airport in Accra, Ghana on January 12, 1982. Back then, there was a mobile staircase to walk down from the plane onto the tarmac to get to the terminal. At the bottom of the stairs, I was met with a machine gun pointed at my head, while a soldier pat-down searched me. We spent that night at the Baha'i Center in Accra on Ring Road. The Baha'i Center was in desperate need of repair, with broken windows and torn screens. The Baha'is fondly nick-named it the Mosquito Center.

That night I sat in the dark in the foyer watching military tanks roll down the street in front of the Center, and I listened to the sirens send out the notice that the curfew had started for the night. Anyone caught out on the street during curfew hours would be shot on site.

What on earth had I done coming here?

Posted by Dennis Hunter at [10:36 PM](#) 1 comment:

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